

# The Linguist Blogger

## What Makes a Language Difficult?

Posted on July 20, 2008 by Ryan

*What is the most difficult language to learn?* is probably the most common question asked by aspiring polyglots. When you ask an academic this question you are likely to be told in return: *It depends on what you mean by difficult* (i.e. most difficult grammar, most difficult writing system, most difficult pronunciation, etc.) or *It depends on what your native language is*. A nice politically correct answer you might hear is that *all languages are equally difficult and equally easy to learn as a native language*. Is there a single language that confuses foreigners more than all others?

### **Misconceptions about Difficult Languages**

Chinese and Hungarian are considered two very difficult languages. I can tell you from personal experience that Mandarin Chinese is not easy. I have not studied Hungarian but I have looked at its phonemes (sound system). There are so many different sounds that I have a hard time seeing how Hungarian could be easy for beginners. Still, just because these languages are tricky for beginners doesn't mean that they are difficult for intermediate or advanced students.

Chinese is made up of syllabic blocks. That means that every character you see has only one syllable assigned to it. Most words only have one or two syllables. After you learn about 1,000 of Chinese's most frequent characters you can understand a huge amount of the language because many of its words are just combinations of these 1,000 syllabic blocks. Chinese grammar is also very simple. There are no conjugations, number agreement, cases, honorifics, noun genders or declensions. Learning the five tones and the first 1,000 characters takes diligent effort, making the beginner stage very frustrating. However, if you have the stamina to get to the intermediate stage then the light at the end of the tunnel ends up being closer than you think.

I have been told by Americans who learned to speak fluent Hungarian that this language is also tough for beginners but less so for intermediate students. It may have a ton of different sounds but if you can learn them all you will find that they are exceptionally well represented by the Hungarian alphabet. Words are spelled very, very similarly to the way they are spoken, unlike English and French.

### **Misconceptions about Easy Languages**

Italian and Bahasa Indonesian are considered fairly easy languages. Their writing systems are pretty straight forward, Italian has a lot of cognates with most European languages and Indonesian's grammar is supposed to be fairly simple. What you might not know is that both of these languages, as foreigners learn them, were artificially created.

The goal of many language students is to learn their target language so well that they can pass for native speakers or at least so they can mask their native accent so well that the native speakers will not know where the learners are from. Native Indonesian and Italian speakers mix their own regional dialects in with the official state language and there are a lot of dialects. Unless you spend a significant amount of time in these regions it is highly unlikely that you will speak the languages in a way that sounds natural to locals. You will be understood but you won't catch everything they say and the way you speak will make you stick out like a sore thumb. Getting to the intermediate stage is easy but getting past there will take a lot of hard work.

## The Most Difficult Foreign Language

I have two disclaimers. The first is that I am not taking most of the world's languages into account. The languages that I am not taking into account have less than one million speakers and few of us will ever attempt to learn any of them. The second is that if your native language is Amharic, Hebrew or Arabic, this does not apply to you. For the other 6.5 billion of us, Arabic appears to be the most difficult language to learn.

*Arabic has an alphabet. Doesn't that make it easier than Japanese or Chinese?* Arabic's alphabet is deceiving, making you think that if you learn it you will be able to speak the language. Almost all of its letters have three versions that look extremely different to a beginner student: initial, middle and final. Vowels are not written so if you haven't learned the word ahead of time by listening to it your chances of understanding it, as written, are few and far in between. Imgn rdng nglsh lk ths. On top of that, written Arabic does a very poor job of reflecting the way people speak.

Arabic isn't just one spoken language. Arabic is over two dozen spoken languages. I have been told that it varies as much as all the modern Latin languages put together. The problem is that the writing system doesn't reflect all of these differences. It's kind of like learning classical Latin and then going to Europe where people speak Castilian, Galician, Catalan, Portuguese, French, Romanian and Italian with different dialects within each of these languages. Even if you learn to speak the Kuwaiti dialect well you probably won't be able to have much of a conversation with a Lebanese or Egyptian person.

Arabic has complex grammar and sound systems. The endings and the beginnings of words change depending on who is talking, who they are referring to, whether or not they are asking a question, etc. There are so many consonants that just about any learner will have to tackle at least a few sounds that either seem impossible to produce or identical to anyone but a native Arabic speaker. Due to these complexities, the lack of mutual intelligibility between regions of Arabic speakers and a beautiful alphabet that doesn't reflect the way people speak, Arabic seems difficult at the beginner, intermediate and advanced levels for almost all non-native speakers of this language.

## Similar Attitudes

The apostle Paul said ([http://www.scripures.lds.org/2\\_cor/13/1#1](http://www.scripures.lds.org/2_cor/13/1#1)) that truth is established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. In this interview (<http://www.stujay.blogspot.com/2007/10/stu-jay-raj-appears-on-tom-mintiers.html>) Stuart Jay Raj talks about how learning to speak Chinese and learning to speak Indonesian like a native are equally difficult. In this post (<http://www.sinosplice.com/life/archives/2008/06/25/learning-curves-chinese-vs-japanese>) ChinesePod's John Pasden compares and contrasts learning Japanese and Chinese and how they are easier or harder at different levels. What do you think the world's most difficult foreign language is and why? What do you think makes learning a language difficult or easy?

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## 4 Responses

1.

**Erik R.**, on [August 1, 2008 at 8:58 am](#) said:

Great post! You make a very good point about separating how difficult things are at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. At the beginner level, I would think that learning a language that doesn't share an alphabet with your native tongue would be very daunting.

For a native English speaker, I think that the learning of a lot of western European languages would be facilitated by the quantity of shared words. With no training whatsoever, an English speaker can read many of the larger compound words in French, Spanish, or Italian, simply because they are so similar to their English counterparts. Once you get past the alphabet, I imagine that Greek would have similar likenesses. Whereas European languages like Hungarian or Basque, that aren't part of the Indo-European family would be much more difficult.

[Reply](#)

2.

**Louise**, on [March 6, 2011 at 12:00 pm](#) said:

Great blog !

But I don't entirely agree with what you wrote on the arabic language ... I've been studying it for 3 years now and I find the alphabet very easy to learn ( despite the fact that each letter has different forms ), and the dialects are not so different to each other as latin languages ... I am french and never studied italian, so when I try to understand italian, it's hard and I don't get everything. But I've been studying levantine arabic dialect for one year and ... I understand almost as much all the other dialects ( except the north-african ones, which could be considered as different to the middle eastern ones as french is different from portuguese ). And with standard arabic you still understand any book or any newspaper / TV news in any arabic country ... Which you can't do with latin in Europe ( sadly maybe ? ).

Anyway, it's just my point of view, for me arabic is only slightly more difficult than english ...

Reply

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**Ryan**, on March 7, 2011 at 5:35 pm said:

I'm glad you have enjoyed it! Arabic only slightly more difficult for a native French speaker than English? I don't know how that could be possible. French and English share thousands of cognates; they have had almost the same cultural, linguistic and religious influences at the same time for hundreds of years. Arabic comes from an entirely different language family, has a very different sound system, has few cognates and very different cultural history. I'm not saying that Arabic is impossible, I'm just saying I have a hard time believing that it's only a little bit more difficult than English. Then again, you have learned English quite well and you are the Arabic student, not I.

I wonder if comparing the Arabic dialects to the Scandinavian languages would be more accurate. The Swedes and the Norwegians can understand 75%-100% of what the other is saying. The stats for Danish are lower but still usually between 50% and 80% if I remember correctly. Icelandic would be comparable to the dialects of western Libya to Casa Blanca? I really ought to study Arabic to find out for myself.

Reply

3.

**Martin**, on September 23, 2012 at 3:04 pm said:

Arabic doesn't have an alphabet; it has an abjad.

Reply

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